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## AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE ORAL COMPOSITION EFFECTIVE

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In these days of purposeful education—of manual training, household arts, domestic science, and vocational courses—perhaps no subject in our high-school curriculum is of more practical value to the individual student than oral composition. This is one study for which the teacher has little difficulty in creating the situation or discovering a purpose: it forms an inherent part of the pupil's whole routine of work and play, for every class hour of the week and every outside interest and activity calls for the oral expression of self and the verbal communication of his ideas to another. Whether he be on the playground, in the classroom, at the club, in his home, in the shop, or in the office, he must know how to deal effectively with his fellows through the medium of speech. Whether our boys be preparing to plead cases in our law courts, to preach from our pulpits, to practice medicine, to deal in real estate, to sell goods over the counter, or to nominate a presidential candidate at a political convention, they must know how to speak. Whether our girls be expecting to teach in our schools, to occupy positions in offices, to sell hats and dress goods, or to take their place in the home and in society, they must know how to speak. And yet for years we have placed the stress of our teaching and exhausted the surplus of our strength upon the written theme, while we have somehow imagined that "just speaking" would take care of itself. Since "just speaking" forms so large a part of our lives, it would seem that it should form an important part of our school curriculum.

This eminently practical mission of oral composition must form the basis of the method of instruction. The first thing of which the student needs to be made conscious is the objective nature of the work. He is immediately concerned with something outside

of himself, a group of listeners, and the ultimate success of his speech depends upon how effectively he reaches them in whatever way he proposes. If he fails to make his listeners *understand* the thing which he is trying to explain to them, *feel* the thing which he is endeavoring to impress upon them, *believe* the thing of which he is attempting to convince them, *do* the thing of which he is anxious to persuade them, or *enjoy* the story or experience by which he hopes to entertain them, he has failed to *accomplish his purpose*, and his composition is not effective, however clear and logical his sentences, or however eloquent his diction.

By setting up a definite aim, we establish at once a standard of judgment and a working basis of criticism. The members of the class can readily determine to what extent the speaker has accomplished his purpose, and they are quick to point out that which was not made clear, to protest against that which did not convince or persuade them, and to condemn that which failed to impress or to entertain. Here lies one of the teacher's greatest aids in securing the best results. Johnny may regard a "dignified presence" and "good form" with secret contempt, and hold "a careful choice of words" as a pedantic and pedagogical peculiarity; but he is immediately impressed by the open condemnation of his classmates, and the fact that they are observing his awkwardness, that they pick out with merciless scrutiny the flaws in his logic, and brand his speech as "stupid" and "no good," fires his ambition in a way that the instructor's criticisms and suggestions never can. He may submit to maturer judgment, and respectfully accept the statement of one with authority that his speech lacks force or his explanation is not clear; but these same facts assume an added reality and pointedness when his friend in the back row frankly declares, "The speaker didn't seem to care whether we got what he said or not, and I didn't get half of it"; or when he confronts a sea of waving hands and a storm of protests and demands, as, "I don't know what electroplating means," and "What is a galvanic cell?"

This direct dealing with his fellow classmates forces upon the attention of the pupil the most important psychological principle in the whole field of effective speaking—the necessity of coming within the experience of his listeners, of selecting and organizing

his material with specific reference to his audience. The boy who attempts to explain the working of a mechanical device with which the girls of the class are not acquainted is at once confronted with the need of comparing the unknown to the known, of interpreting the new in terms of the familiar. Likewise the girl wishing to make felt the need for better equipment in the domestic science department, or endeavoring to excite enthusiasm over the organization of a new literary circle, may be made to feel the importance of selecting those facts which will most appeal to her audience and those methods of presentation which will impress them most strongly.

A situation arising out of the student's own experience, calling for the application of these principles of composition, and affording him an opportunity to measure his results, is an invaluable exercise. Last spring an enterprising lad in our school, who was enthusiastic over the establishment of a school paper, went round from room to room endeavoring to secure regular subscribers by urging the need of support and appealing to school spirit. The result was the usual response to the call of duty: the subscription blank which had been placed upon the bulletin board hung there, blankly expectant, for several days. Then one morning in the composition class I inquired as to the success of the new project. Our former enthusiast was frankly discouraged, and cited his fruitless efforts as evidence of the fact that the school was lacking in spirit and progressiveness. An examination of his method of appeal, however, led the class to a very different conclusion. As one boy aptly put it, "The speaker said a great deal about the paper needing us, but he didn't say a word about our needing the paper. It seems to me if I was going to buy a thing I'd want to know what I was going to get out of it." A little consideration showed that there was not a pupil in the school for whom the paper—with its official bulletins, its class news, its original productions, its reports of student activities and social functions, its personal column, its gossip, its jokes—had not some special interest. By the time our discussion was over, the discouraged promoter had taken heart and was ready to begin his labors anew, and before a week had passed his subscription list was growing with an encouraging rapidity.

The complex life of a large high school is constantly offering such opportunities for practical exercises in oral composition. The vocational courses suggest the possibility of canvassing, demonstrating, interviewing, and selling. The science laboratories, with their work of investigating, testing, and proving, open up an interesting field of exposition. Student activities, mass-meetings, and public functions call for announcing, organizing, and presiding officials; and there are always the special occasions of contests and entertainments, with their chances of competition and exhibition for the ambitious.

A college professor recently said, "Give a boy a good training in oral composition and you have given him a liberal education." Surely it is a comprehensive study. It involves the collection of material for a given purpose, the selection of that which is most effective with relation to a definite situation and a particular audience, and its organization into a unified, logical, and effective whole. Does not all this demand training in keen observation, clear thinking, and sound judgment—practical virtues which the public have long deposited in the credit column of the sciences?